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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SADRIST SWEEP OF SOUTH NOT A GIVEN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) This is a joint Baghdad POL - ePRT, PRT, and REO
reporting cable.

12. (C) Summary: Contrary to popular opinion, it is not a
foregone conclusion that the Sadrist Trend will sweep the
southern governorates in the next round of provincial
elections. Numerous PRT engagements suggest that the
reduction in Coalition Forces (CF) presence and continuing
militia violence have decreased the appeal of the Sadrist
narrative and threatened Sadr's popularity. Sadr's freeze
declaration and attempts to expand into service delivery are
attempts to remake the Sadr Trend and Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)
into legitimate political organizations. However, continuing
battles with Badr, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and CF
have weakened JAM's street presence and have limited its
ability to co-opt existing service delivery mechanisms
outside of Baghdad. Lacking control of official government
institutions in many areas, unable to deliver services,
saddled with a deserved reputation for violence, and
struggling to adapt their message to a diminished Coalition
presence, Sadr and his followers may struggle to gain a
significant number of seats in the next round of provincial
elections. ISCI's election prospects will be reported
septel. End Summary.

Police, Badr, and CF Persecution

13. (C) Though the conventional wisdom holds that the Sadrist
Trend will emerge as the big winner in the southern
governorates during the next round of provincial elections,
such a victory is not a foregone conclusion. There are
several reasons to believe that OMS/JAM may face a
surprisingly difficult electoral battle. For example, in
several provinces JAM is on the defensive. ISF commanders in
Dhi Qar, Babil, Karbala, Wasit, Diwaniyah and Muthanna have
repeatedly targeted OMS offices and JAM members. Only in
Maysan does JAM essentially control the security services,
while in Basrah the police commander is politically neutral
but hampered by JAM infiltration of the police force. Some
of what JAM perceives as ISF persecution is legitimate
response to JAM violence, yet there is little question that,
where possible, Badr uses the IP to weaken its primary
opponent. Despite nominally adhering to a public cease-fire,
Badr militia units have also attacked JAM elements directly.
Finally, CF have continued interdiction and arrest operations
in some areas of the south. The cumulative effect of these
operations has weakened OMS/JAM's structural and
administrative base and hindered the Sadrist Trend's ability
to expand into humanitarian charities and service delivery.

Public and Tribal Resentment

14. (C) Numerous contacts indicate a shift in public
perception against religious parties due to the inefficiency,

corruption, and violence linked to religious parties and their militias. This shift also reflects growing public resentment towards Iran's support of militias and political parties, particularly outside of Karbala and Najaf. A Sadrism government in Maysan and Sadrism mayor in al-Kut will be judged on their development and governance performance. Meanwhile, the public reputation of Sadristism throughout the south will continue to suffer due to JAM-associated violence, including the unrest in Karbala during the Shabiniyah pilgrimage in August 2007 and the assassinations of public officials. For Sadr and JAM, this general shift is compounded by the declining power of an anti-coalition narrative. The diminishing CF presence in the south and continuing violence between Iraqis has shifted responsibility to Iraqi institutions and parties. As a movement founded on opposition to the coalition, this shift directly threatens JAM's base of support.

15. (C) This public backlash extends to the south's tribes. JAM recruits from populations of unemployed young men in urban areas. Many of these men have tribal ties, and their involvement in militia activity has subsequently pulled the tribes into violent conflict, costing lives and resources. In response, many sheikhs are taking steps against JAM. In Muthanna, tribal leaders forced JAM members to pay blood debts at 10 times the normal rate or face expulsion from the province. The resulting financial burdens incurred on tribes with JAM members caused tribes to withdraw their support for any tribal member belonging to JAM. Similarly, the Karbala Tribal Council ruled that paying of a blood debt is no longer required for the killing of a tribal member associated with a militia after JAM repeatedly violated an agreement signed with tribal leaders not to kill tribal members.

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16. (C) Established parties such as ISCI, Da'wa and Fadhilah have the advantage of being able to counter anti-religious party sentiment by using their control of government institutions to distribute goods, money and services to voters before an election. The Sadristism lack real political control outside of Wasit and Maysan and are correspondingly less able to use official largesse to guarantee votes. Instead, JAM is likely to rely on voter intimidation in areas where it maintains a formidable street presence, particularly Wasit, Basrah, and Maysan.

Failure in service delivery

17. (C) Part of JAM's popular support in Baghdad stems from its involvement in service delivery. Despite its best efforts, JAM has been largely unable to duplicate this model in the southern governorates. JAM lacks the organizational structure and knowledge base to effectively distribute resources across the south, even in Basrah. Similarly, constant battles with CF, ISF and Badr have weakened JAM's street presence and prevented it from co-opting existing delivery mechanisms. In Babil, attempts to expand into service delivery have lagged due to continued pressure from the security forces, a normalizing fuel market, and lowered demand for ice during winter months. There are no reported efforts by JAM of any significance in other southern governorates.

Comment: Political futures of OMS/JAM

18. (C) Comment: The Sadrist Trend's struggle to maintain its powerbase in the south raises several possible political futures for OMS/JAM. One is that the Sadrist movement will continue to fracture, with mainstream elements distancing themselves from JAM and Iran while emphasizing a "core" Sadrist message of Iraqi nationalism and opposition to foreign intervention. The second is that public dissatisfaction with religious parties will create a third

space for independent and more secular candidates able to capitalize on public disenchantment with religious parties. Finally, there remains a chance that OMS/JAM will overcome their current challenges and increase their political power through a combination of populism, intimidation, and social welfare. The degree to which any of these trends emerge will depend largely on local factors and vary widely from province to province. However, it remains doubtful that any single Shi'a party, be it Sadr or ISCI, will sweep the southern elections. End Comment.
BUTENIS